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ABSTRACT

A study examined the role of ethics in advertising and public relations courses. A questionnaire was sent to 183 colleges and universities that offer major fields of studies in advertising or public relations, and 134 institutions responded for a return rate of 73%. Results indicated that: (1) nearly all (97%) of the respondents affirm that the study of ethics is either "very important" or "important" for public relations and advertising students; (2) 78% report such studies are "extremely important"; (3) 90% rank ethics as an "increasingly important issue" for professional practitioners, and 74% "strongly" agree that the issue of ethics is increasingly important; (4) 93% assert that public relations or advertising sequences include the study of ethics, and 82% require students to complete courses with at least some ethics content; but (5) only 25% of the institutions offered courses devoted exclusively to ethics; and (6) only 26% feel that educational institutions should have the major responsibility for inculcating ethics. Findings suggest that there is a need for teachers who are familiar with the singular moral questions that pertain to advertising and public relations practices in the marketplace, and a separate course in ethics should be required as part of the core curriculum. (One table of data and 13 footnotes are included.) (RS)

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COMMUNICATION CURRICULA AND ETHICS

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COMMUNICATION CURRICULA AND ETHICS

S. L. Harrison

In the past, the issue of ethics as an aspect of the public relations and advertising curricula was addressed sparingly and the literature was sparse and sporadic. Recent years, however, have witnessed a spurt of interest in the subject.[1] No one has pinpointed the precise cause, but a number of events appear to have prompted the American public into a heightened awareness of ethics.

Corruption and similar misdeeds have been part of the American culture for years. Even George Washington was guilty of misdeeds. The Grant Administration was rife with crime in high offices. Teapot Dome capped the Harding Administration. The Watergate affair toppled the Nixon Administration. But the now-departed Reagan Administration experienced more questions of wrong-doing and questions of ethical misconduct than any era in American history.[2]

These events have had repercussions in the classroom. Communication students of all political persuasion are asking ethical questions heretofore discussed, if at all, in philosophy or religion classes. Given the widespread

issues of misconduct in government as well as questionable behavior reported of public relations insiders and dubious practices by advertisers, Wall Street manipulators and lobbyists, it is clear that there is growing concern with ethics in the communication disciplines in American universities and colleges.[3]

Ethics has been a staple in journalism courses for some time, of course, and these are usually combined with a law of the press course or included within courses that deal with regulations.[4] But ethics as a specific issue is increasingly evident across a wide-spectrum of undergraduate and graduate areas in the curriculum for a number of universities. The focus here is what role does this subject play in the specific areas of advertising and public relations? These areas are related in the broad role of communications courses, of course. Indeed, they can each be separated into distinct areas if not departments. Often, these subjects in the academic curriculum are found within "communication" studies.

METHODOLOGY

In order to ascertain the role of ethics, a survey questionnaire was sent to 183 colleges and universities that offer major fields of studies in advertising or public relations.[5] The academic institutions were selected from those listed in two publications: Where to Study Public Relations and Where Shall I Go to Study Advertising?[6]

Cover letters and postage-paid return envelopes accompanied the questionnaires sent July-October, 1988. A total of 134 institutions responded for a 73 percent return rate. Fourteen closed and open-ended questions dealt with ethics courses that pertained to public relations and advertising curricula. Questions elicited names of courses, required or elective, texts and consideration of plans to add ethics courses in the next 24 months. A question was included to determine where ethics courses were offered for advertising and public relations students. Some are part of a core curriculum, some are included in the major field of study or some are included in other areas, say, Journalism, and required of public relations and advertising students.

Two questions--one dealing with the issue of ethics as "essential" for students of public relations or advertising--and one dealing with the issue of ethics as "increasingly important"--were rated on a five-point scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree."

All data were tabulated and rounded to the nearest full percentage. A portion of the questionnaire allowed "comment" for any and all portions of the questions or other subjects for the respondents to include remarks, as an optional feature.

FINDINGS

Nearly all (97 percent) respondents affirm that the study of ethics is either "very important" or "important" for public relations and advertising students. Three of four

(78 percent) report such studies are "extremely important." A majority (90 percent) of respondents rank ethics an "increasingly important issue" for professional practitioners. Nearly three-quarters (74 percent) "strongly" agree the issue of ethics is "increasingly important." (Table 1.)

An evident significance is given to ethics by respondents. Nearly all (93 percent) assert that public relations or advertising sequences include the study of ethics. Most (82 percent) require students to complete courses with at least some ethics content. Only 25 percent of the institutions surveyed offer courses devoted exclusively to ethics, however.

Results of the survey were compiled in the aggregate and respondents were assured of anonymity. Nevertheless, readers of this journal may find particularly interesting the Florida colleges and universities surveyed. A total of nine institutions were listed in the two sources used to determine the universe. Seven were listed in each source, i.e., with programs in each of the two areas, public relations and advertising: Florida Southern College; Florida State University; University of Central Florida; University of Florida; University of Miami; University of South Florida; and University of West Florida. Two were listed in one category but not the other. Florida International University has a major progam in advertising but not public relations. Similarly, Florida A&M University was identified as having a major in public relations but not advertising.

Since survey responses were anonymous, specific details of each program are not available from that source. But a basic search of each of the current academic bulletins for these specific schools disclose that three have a course in ethics and that for two, it is required. This closely reflects the national results where approximately one in four schools had an ethics course (25 percent), and about half of these (52 percent) were required.

Advertising and public relations courses that include ethics are primarily in the communication school or department (64 percent). A significant number (18 percent) of public relations and advertising majors have access to ethics courses in the news-editorial/journalism sequence. Some 12 percent of ethics courses for public relations and advertising students are offered within the business school (7 percent) or the philosophy department (5 percent). Respondents assert that a wide array of courses cover ethics -- from "Principles of Public Relations/Advertising" to "Laws and Ethics of Mass Communications" and "Mass Media and Society."

The texts most-cited for ethics courses for public relations and advertising students were: Media Ethics: Cases and Moral Reasoning; Groping for Ethics in Journalism; Ethics in Human Communication and Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life.[8] Clearly, at least one of these texts is aimed at journalism students, another is a general discussion of one ethical issue and the others include some discussion for advertising and public relations students. None cited

by respondents appears to focus exclusively on the ethical issues within advertising and public relations. This is not to say that each is a useful and no doubt noteworthy text but advertising and public relations students are apt to emerge as second-class citizens in a classroom focused on journalism and the newsroom.

Clearly, it is evident that if most students have exposure to ethical issues this topic must occur in the general coursework. Indeed, this is where most respondents assert that ethics is covered (93 percent). Respondents identified some fifty textbooks for the hundred or more courses identified.

The top-ranked public relations textbooks in use are for the principal courses. By far the most popular is Effective Public Relations followed by This is PR: The Realities of Public Relations, The Practice of Public Relations and Public Relations: Strategies and Tactics.[9] The discussion of ethics within these basic textbooks vary considerably, from excellent to not-so-excellent.[10]

The most-mentioned advertising textbooks identified by the respondents are: Kleppner's Advertising Procedure, Advertising: Concepts and Strategies, Creative Strategy in Advertising and the succinct, Advertising.[11] Most of the public relations texts do make mention of ethical issues. In contrast, the advertising texts provide much

more meager fare with sparse attention to this topic.[12]

If ethics is covered within the course work, as most respondents assert, the burden of classroom instruction requires a monumental task indeed for the conscientious teacher. Little help is provided by many of the texts; therefore, much of this material must be provided in the lecture portion of the instruction.

A majority (70 percent) of institutions that offer ethics courses in whole or part are satisfied with curriculum content. Only about one-quarter (24 percent) plan to augment curricula with exclusively ethics courses in the next two years. Some five percent of institutions responding indicate that ethics are not included in courses and have no plans to add such studies in the next two years. Three percent do not agree that ethics is important or have no opinion.

Almost all (97 percent) agree or strongly agree that the study of ethics is "essential" for public relations and advertising students. They do not agree, however, that the primary responsibility for strengthening ethical standards lies with the schools. Almost half (46 percent) feel that this task should be left with the professional practitioners. More than a third (36 percent) feel that the professional associations should have this responsibility. Only one in four (26 percent) feel that the educational institutions should have the major responsibility for inculcating ethics. Rated lowest by educators surveyed was "government" through regulation or legislation and "religious institutions."

Indeed, in an open-end comment more than 12 percent of the respondents felt that the "media" in its watch-dog role should bear this burden and a number of educators (6 percent) felt that the ethical training belongs "in the home."

CONCLUSIONS

Communication educators teaching public relations and advertising agree overwhelmingly that ethics is an important subject. Indeed, most assert that this topic is included in all courses across the curriculum. But many of the academic respondents are not at all certain that they should be teaching ethical issues; more than three of four feel that this task lies elsewhere beyond the academic institutions. Only one in four of the institutions surveyed have a course devoted to ethics. Nevertheless, eight out of ten respondents assert that students are required to take courses that have some element of ethics.

But textbooks for the ethics courses themselves appear to be less than satisfactory for the needs of public relations and advertising students--the focus is often on journalism and elsewhere across the media spectrum. Moreover, the basic textbooks, rated the most popular in use by the respondents, perform a less than satisfactory job in this area. The basic principles course appears to be the proper setting to establish a foundation of ethical thought and application.

If teaching ethics is across the spectrum, as most respondents assert, the thought emerges that educators must

exert vast efforts to bring into classroom discussion the ethical issues that pertain to advertising and public relations activities. We must move from lip-service pieties and self-serving homilies or assertions that the task is really best performed by someone elsewhere.

It should be evident to thoughtful observers in the academic community that the task is two-fold. First, is the need for teachers who know ethics issues and theory. Teachers are needed who are familiar with the singular moral questions that pertain to advertising and public relations practices in the marketplace. A major effort required from advertising and public relations educators is to focus these disciplines into vigorous academic regimes that shed the "trade school" mentality and removes them from the "step child" of journalism schools.

The second requirement is just as difficult. A separate course in ethics should be required as part of the core curriculum. If this course emphasizes the professional area, perhaps it should be preceded by a suitable prerequisite in theory or system within the Philosophy department. From that foundation other course work can build toward fruitful inquiry into ethical and moral issues of a specific nature. In-depth case studies can be explored and developed..

Then it will be possible to teach, discuss and analyze ethical issues in the classroom.

TABLE 1

QUESTION RESPONSES

	Percent
COURSES OFFERED TO STUDY ETHICS EXCLUSIVELY (n = 132)	
YES - COURSES STUDY ETHICS EXCLUSIVELY	25
NO - DO NOT STUDY ETHICS EXCLUSIVELY	75
PLANS TO EXPAND CURRENT CURRICULUM EXCLUSIVELY DEVOTED TO ETHICS (n = 33)	
YES - PLANNING TO EXPAND	24
NO - NOT PLANNING TO EXPAND	70
NO RESPONSE	6
COURSES OFFERED THAT INCLUDE STUDY OF ETHICS (n = 132)	
YES - COURSES INCLUDE ETHICS	93
NO - COURSES DO NOT INCLUDE THICS	5
NO RESPONSE	
PLANS TO EXPAND CURRICULUM INCLUDING FOR ETHICS (n = 123)	
YES - PLANNING TO EXPAND	19
NO - NOT PLANNING TO EXPAND	71
NO RESPONSE	
SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY OF ETHICS (n = 132)	
Responses to the statement "The study of ethics is essential for students preparing to practice public relations or advertising:"	
STRONGLY AGREE	78
AGREE	19
UNDECIDED	1
DISAGREE	1
STRONGLY DISAGREE	-
NO RESPONSE	1
ETHICS IS AN INCREASINGLY IMPORTANT ISSUE (n = 132)	
Responses to the statement "Ethics is increasingly becoming an important issue for practitioners of public relations or advertising:"	
STRONGLY AGREE	74
AGREE	16
UNDECIDED	5
DISAGREE	1
STRONGLY DISAGREE	-
NO RESPONSE	4

NOTES

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. This article is based on a paper by the author and Lynne M. Sallot, "Communication Curricula: A Survey of Ethics and Promotional Writing," presented at the Florida Communication Association annual meeting, Orlando, Fla., October 1989

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[1]Bernard Den Ouden (ed.), A Symposium On Ethics: The Role of Moral Values in Contemporary Thought (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982).

[2]Gerald F. Seib, "GOP's Legacy: From Grant to Reagan, Scandals Seem to Hit Republican Presidents," The Wall Street Journal July 16, 1987, 1 This was before the hundreds of millions of dollars scandal involving Reagan's Housing and Urban Development (HUD) department and Cabinet officer Sam Pierce, See "Too Silent, Sam." Editorial. The Miami Herald Sept. 28, 1989 22A.

[3]"Ethics in Public Relations," Public Relations Review 2 (1989): 1-72.

[4]"Journalism Moral Philosophy," Journal of Mass Media Ethics 1 (1988): 3-102.

[5]"Ethics and Promotional Writing in Communications Curricula at Universities and Colleges Offering Advertising

and Public Relations Sequences," a survey conducted June-October 1988, by the author assisted by Lynne M. Sallot under the auspices of the School of Communication, University of Miami. A questionnaire method was used with a series of open and closed responses. Data, percentages and comparisons are drawn from survey responses. The author thanks Ms Sallot for data tabulation, compilation of responses and selected text comment. The promotional writing portion is not reported here.

[6]Many hundreds of colleges and universities teach courses in advertising and public relations but in order to narrow the universe to those with comprehensive programs, two sources were consulted: Michael B. Hesse, Robert Kindall and James Terhune, Where to Study Public Relations (New York: Public Relations Society of America, 1986) and Billy I. Ross, Where Should I Go to Study Advertising? (Lubbock, Texas: Texas Advertising Education Publications, 1988).

[7]The author thanks Sherrie Lisitski for assistance with this investigation of pertinent Bulletin texts.

[8]More than two-dozen texts were identified by respondents but these were the top four: Clifford G. Christians, Kim B. Rotzoll and Mark Fackler, Media Ethics: Cases and Moral Reasoning 2d ed. (New York: Longman, 1987); H. Eugene Goodwin, Groping for Ethics in Journalism (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State UP, 1983); Richard L. Johannesen, Ethics in Human Communication 2d ed. (Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1983); Sissela Bok, Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

[9]Scott M. Cutlipp, Allen H. Center and Glen M. Broom, Effective Public Relations 6th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: (Prentice-Hall, 1985); Doug Newsom and Allen Scott, This Is PR: The Realities of Public Relations 3d ed. (Belmont, Cal.: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1985); Fraser P. Seitel, The Practice Of Public Relations 3d ed. (Columbus, Ohio: Merrill Publishing Co., 1987); and Dennis L. Wilcox, Phillip H. Ault and Warren K. Agre, Public Relations: Strategies and Tactics (New York: Harper & Row, 1986). Note that several of these texts have seen new editions since the survey (Newsom, et al, 1989; Seitel, 1989; and Wilcox, et al, 1989) but these were the texts in use at the time of the survey period.

[10]S.L. Harrison, "Teaching Public Relations: The Role of Ethics," a paper presented at the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (AEJMC) meeting Sept. 1989, reviews the ethical content of the texts surveyed and newer editions.

[11]J. Thomas Russell, Glenn Verrill and W. Ronald Lance, Kleppner's Advertising Procedure 10th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1988); Harold W. Berkman and Christopher Gilson, Advertising Concepts and Strategies 2d ed. (New York: Random House, 1987); A Jerome Jeweler, Creative Strategy in Advertising ed ed. (Belmont, Cal.: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1985); and Dorothy Cohen, Advertising (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Forseman and Co., 1988). Jeweler's newest edition is 1989.

[12]For a commentary on these texts, see S.L. Harrison, "Pedagogical Ethics: A Review of the Literature for Public Relations and Advertising," a paper presented at the Speech Communication Association meeting November 1989.